

# THE IMPERATIVE OF REFORMS IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO ADULTS: A METHODOLOGICAL NECESSITY AND SOCIAL TREND

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**Abstract:** *This article studies the imperative of reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults both from the social point of view and methodological needs of the particular process of foreign language teaching for representatives of a special age group. The starting point of the article is the authors' own experimental research in the form of a questionnaire, which, as the target audience, conducted a survey of people aged 45+ studying at or graduated from foreign language courses as a part of integration programs (the survey was conducted among relocants from Ukraine after February 24, 2022) finding out what factors contributed / did not contribute to their success and psychological comfort in language learning. The second part of the study presents the results of a survey of teachers who work in foreign language courses attached to higher educational institutions of Ukraine and presents their point of view on the difficulties of teaching in mixed age groups and in groups dominated by people over 40 years. The purpose of the article is to show that in order to fulfill the social tasks that modern society places on the study of foreign languages by older people, changes in methodological approaches to the stated process are necessary.*

**Keywords:** *adult students, anti-agism, methodological need, social trend, teaching of foreign languages.*

## Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in foreign languages has become not only a valuable skill but also a necessity for personal, professional, and social advancement. While language learning has traditionally been associated with formal education during childhood and adolescence, there is a growing recognition of the importance of teaching languages to adults. This essay explores the imperative of reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults,

highlighting the methodological necessity and societal trend driving this imperative. In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in foreign languages has become not only a valuable skill but also a necessity for personal, professional, and social advancement. While language learning has traditionally been associated with formal education during childhood and adolescence, there is a growing recognition of the importance of teaching languages to adults (Steber, Rossi, 2021). This article explores the imperative of reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults, highlighting the methodological necessity and societal trend driving this imperative. Teaching foreign languages to adults requires a tailored approach that acknowledges the unique characteristics, needs, and motivations of adult learners. Unlike children, adults bring prior knowledge, life experiences, and cognitive abilities that influence their language learning process (Zilberman, 2019). Therefore, traditional pedagogical methods designed for younger learners may not be effective for adults. Beyond the methodological necessity, there is a broader societal trend driving the imperative of reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults. This trend is shaped by various social, economic, and demographic factors. The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, initiated by the Russian Federation's invasion on February 24, 2022, has triggered a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions. As a result, millions of Ukrainians, predominantly women with children and the elderly, have been forcibly displaced, seeking refuge in other countries and embarking on the arduous journey of integration into unfamiliar societies. In light of this crisis, the issue of effectively teaching foreign languages to adults, particularly those over 40 years old, has gained immense relevance. The article aims to present the idea of the need for new methodical approaches to make the process of teaching foreign languages to older students (people over 45) more effective. It highlights evolving social trends and the inherent challenges encountered by both learners in this age group and the educators who instruct them. The primary research methodology employed for this article involved administering a questionnaire and utilising statistical analysis to interpret the gathered data. The findings derived from this approach are detailed within the article.

### **Literature review**

As individuals age, the importance of learning a foreign language grows significantly, contributing to personal, professional, and cognitive enrichment. This literature review delves into works utilised by the authors to frame and characterise the challenges of foreign language acquisition among older individuals, typically aged 40-45 and above. Specifically, publications by J. Agor (2019) and R. Van Sickle with J. Rosa (2022) provide insights over the problem from a social perspective, emphasizing the undeniable benefits of language learning within this age group. Meanwhile, J. Nilsson, R. Berggren, B. Garzon,

and M. Lovden (2021) and R. Schmidt (2010) offer medical viewpoints, discussing the implications and considerations regarding language learning in older age. Additionally, K. Rege (2016) and S. Steber with S. Rossi (2021) highlight career opportunities stemming from foreign language proficiency for individuals over 40. V. Murphy, H. Arndt, J. Baffoe-Djan, H. Chalmers, E. Macaro, H. Rose, R. Vanderplank, and R. Woore (2020) contribute a comprehensive examination of adult learners' psychological profiles, while B. Mei's (2022) scientific article delves into their educational needs. Furthermore, insights on motivation are provided by A. Zilberman's (2019) online post. Collectively, these works enable the authors to construct a nuanced understanding of the educational landscape for adult language learners, encompassing a diverse array of perspectives and considerations.

### **Methodology**

Given that this article encompasses both a theoretical examination of foreign language acquisition among individuals aged 45 and above, alongside the presentation of survey findings conducted by the authors, its methodology represents a fusion of approaches aimed at guaranteeing the credibility and substantiation of the content presented within the article. In particular, the following scientific methods and approaches were used:

1. Survey was a primary method for gathering data on the difficulties and psychological discomforts experienced by older learners and the methodological challenges faced by teachers;
2. Interviews with teachers who work with multi-aged language-learning groups provided rich qualitative data on their experiences, challenges, strategies and methods that are typically used for teaching this particular group of students;
3. Observing language classes with older learners provided first hand insights into teaching methods, learner interactions, and challenges faced in the classroom.
4. Analysing existing materials over the general issues of the problem under consideration frameworked the first part of the article that presents the main ideas as to teaching foreign languages to the people over 45 as a modern social and pedagogical trend.

Though Literature Review was not a primary research method, it together with Mixed Methods Approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Triangulating data from multiple sources enhanced the validity and reliability of findings

## **Research results**

The issue of learning a foreign language in adulthood (at least after 40 years) is not something new for modern sociology and it correlates with many social movements, in particular "Long-life education", "Anti-ageism programs", "Possibilities of labor mobility of highly qualified workers", "Accelerating the integration of migrants and relocants" etc. Numerous publications emphasise the multifaceted aspects of foreign language learning for people after 40-45, covering personal, cognitive, and interpersonal aspects of well-being, and in particular, reinforcing such benefits as:

- Language learning often involves engaging with local or online communities of learners: for individuals over 45, this can provide opportunities for social interaction with people who share similar interests and goals, fostering new friendships and support networks (Rosa, 2022);
- Learning a foreign language opens doors to understanding and appreciating different cultures: older learners may have a deeper appreciation for cultural nuances and traditions, enriching their social interactions as they engage with native speakers and immerse themselves in cultural activities;
- Many adults pursue language learning as a means to enhance their travel experiences: knowing the local language can facilitate meaningful interactions with locals, leading to deeper cultural insights and connections while exploring new destinations (Van Sickle, 2017);
- Learning a new language can have cognitive benefits, such as improving memory and problem-solving skills, which are particularly relevant for older adults. Additionally, attending language classes or joining language exchange groups provides opportunities for mental stimulation and socialisation, which are important for overall well-being;
- Language proficiency can open up new professional opportunities for older adults, whether through international business ventures, volunteer work, or teaching opportunities, provide avenues for social interaction and personal growth beyond traditional retirement activities (Rege, 2016);
- Learning a foreign language may also strengthen familial bonds, especially in multicultural families or when grandchildren are learning a heritage language. Older adults may find joy in sharing language-learning experiences with younger generations, fostering closer relationships and cultural connections within the family;
- Language learning for individuals over 45 is often driven by personal fulfillment and a desire for continued growth and development:

engaging in language learning activities provides a sense of achievement and purpose, while also offering opportunities for social connection and cultural enrichment (Nilsson et al., 2021).

Teaching foreign languages to adults necessitates a customised approach that recognises their distinct characteristics, requirements, and incentives. Unlike children, adults come with pre-existing knowledge, life experiences, and cognitive capabilities (Murphy et al., 2020) that shape their language acquisition journey. Consequently, conventional teaching methods geared towards younger learners may not yield the same effectiveness when applied to adults (Schmidt, 2010). In addition to the methodological imperative, a larger societal trend underscores the necessity for reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults. This trend is influenced by a multitude of social, economic, and demographic factors.

The displacement of over 6 million Ukrainians (About the Crisis in Ukraine, 2024), many of whom are women, children, and elderly individuals, has created an urgent humanitarian imperative to facilitate their integration into host communities. Language proficiency stands as a foundational element in this process, enabling refugees to navigate essential services, secure employment opportunities, access education, and engage meaningfully in social interactions. Effective foreign language teaching for adults assumes a paramount significance in empowering displaced individuals to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their new environments. Forced migration engenders a myriad of challenges for displaced individuals, particularly in the realm of language acquisition (Agor, 2019). Adults, especially those over 40 years old, may encounter unique obstacles in learning a new language amidst the upheaval of displacement. Factors such as trauma, cultural adjustment, and limited access to educational resources can impede the language learning process, exacerbating feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Moreover, older adults may face cognitive barriers and entrenched language habits that necessitate specialised pedagogical approaches tailored to their needs.

The authors of the article conducted a survey of people over 40 years old (the oldest recipient is 83 years old), who are studying or have completed mandatory language courses that are part of the program for the integration of Ukrainian refugees in countries such as Portugal, Germany, Poland and Spain. The purpose of this survey (300 people from different cities of the above-mentioned countries took part) was to find out whether the process of learning the language at language courses, arranged by the government, was psychologically and emotionally comfortable for them, as well as what exactly contributed / hindered their progress. The survey was conducted in March 2023, June 2023 and December 2023 with graduates and students of courses to gain a deeper understanding of the problems. With the axiomatic starting point, that state language courses are staffed by highly qualified teachers who have modern methods of teaching a specific language as a foreign language and use a wide

range of tools (modern textbooks (no older than 2018 edition), online platforms that contain additional tasks and educational materials, educational applications, etc.), students who studied with the same teacher, but in different groups and achieved the goal of mastering the language, gave quite different answers to questions related to the emotional comfort of learning. The results of the survey on the emotional comfort of learning a foreign language on courses among recipients are as follows:

1. Question 1: Were you emotionally comfortable studying at the courses?

Variants of answers: yes, completely - 9 %

quite comfortable - 25%

normally - 31%

quite uncomfortable - 16 %

not comfortable at all - 19%

In the course of further research, it was found that the emotional satisfaction of students was influenced by only 2 factors: the age of fellow students and the age of the teacher: the older the teacher was, the more comfortable students aged 40+ felt in the classroom. And the more homogeneous the groups were in terms of age, the higher was the percentage of emotional satisfaction with learning among students of a certain age. The most comfortable were the students who, for learning a foreign language, found themselves in groups where the age of the students varied within 10 years (40-50 years). The more diverse the age of the students who were grouped together, the less comfortable the recipients found the learning process in the classroom. Note that during the research, the authors of the article did not happen to see state language courses for Ukrainian refugees, which used the principle of dividing students by age. Usually, this process takes into account only the level of language proficiency. Therefore, 20-year-old, 45-year-old and 60-year-old people could be in the same group for learning a foreign language on courses.

As for the reasons that led to emotional dissatisfaction with learning a foreign language in multi-age groups among students aged 40+ (note that all students in such groups were Ukrainians with almost the same level of foreign language proficiency), they can be divided into several groups:

765436064. *Diverse learning styles and preferences*: Recipients identified that younger students in their groups gravitated toward interactive, technology-oriented learning. They felt comfortable with fast-paced actions, multitasking, and homework with using educational apps and platforms. In groups dominated by young people, students over 40 lacked more traditional approaches (with textbooks, traditional forms of listening, writing words, composing dialogues, etc.). Because of this, there was no full-fledged communication and cooperation between students of different ages, tasks were performed only in established pairs within the group. Older students took a more passive position in learning;

765436065. *Generational and cultural differences*: The difference in likes, interests, famous people, etc. between the younger students and the 40+ students also meant that the older people either didn't understand what was being talked about or the teacher had to spend time at the lesson and to explain to a certain part of the students who or what this text is about. (We note once again that the textbooks used in the courses were published after 2018). Older recipients found it difficult to relate to the experiences, interests, and cultural identities of their younger classmates, leading to feelings of alienation and disconnection. In addition, as cultural norms and communication styles differ between people of different ages, it further complicated the interaction between students (and sometimes, between students and the teacher if the teacher was much younger) and hindered effective language learning;
765436066. *Pace of learning and academic expectations*: Recipients noted that it was quite difficult for them not only to keep up with the pace of the lessons (younger students are used to rapid information processing and multitasking and can grasp language concepts more quickly and demonstrate a higher level of language proficiency in a shorter period of time), but also assimilate the amount of new information offered to them. They needed additional time and support to learn new information and master complex linguistic structures, constant repetition of the material passed (younger students did not need such repetitions and perceived this type of activity negatively). This discrepancy in the pace of learning also caused frustration and demotivation among older students, a certain withdrawal from the learning process. ;
765436067. *Socio-economic and professional background*: Different goals and aspirations for language learning between older and younger students within the same group led to misunderstandings in the choice of content to study, as younger students had a wider range of interests, while students after the age of 40 would like to study “promising” for themselves material. For example, if a student has a professional education and apprentices in a certain profession, then he/she would like to learn vocabulary from this direction in order to find a job in the specialty as soon as possible. According to the recipients, young students (especially those who did not finish their education, did not gain professional skills in Ukraine, etc.) “were happy to learn almost everything”. In addition, differences in educational attainment and life experience had some effect on the level of prior knowledge and language skills among students, further complicating the learning process and potentially exacerbating feelings of inadequacy among older students;
765436068. *The level of a student technical training*: difficulties also arose with exercises needed to use online platforms, since the level of general computer education and training did not allow older students to join tasks in time, they did not always have enough time to complete tests online (due to the fact that

a lot of time was spent on understanding of "how it works") . The use of mobile applications was also quite difficult for older students (after 45 years) due to low computer literacy and a certain technological bias. This aspect became an increasingly negative factor with the age level of the recipient.

Teaching a foreign language to a diverse group of learners, spanning a wide age range, presents unique challenges for educators. As classrooms become increasingly heterogeneous, teachers encounter a variety of obstacles that stem from differences in learning styles, life experiences, and expectations among students. The second half of the survey the authors explored the difficulties that teachers may encounter while instructing multigenerational foreign language classes (Mei, B. (2022)). The data for this part of the study was the results of a questionnaire which was offered to 150 teachers from different countries (Ukraine, Spain, Portugal, Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, France). All the recipients are university teachers of English, French or Portuguese and have experience teaching a foreign language at language courses attached to the educational institutions there they work. The choice of countries to participate in the survey was determined by one of the authors' participation in the international university teachers training program at the University of Cadiz (Spain) in March 2023, where, with the consent of the program organisers, the questionnaire was offered for the participants.

Among the questions that were asked to practicing teachers in view of the subject of the survey and research, in particular, there were the following:

1. *Have you ever worked with multi-age groups?*

Yes (age of students 20-45 years old) - 83%;

Yes (age of students 20-63) - 15%;

No (only youth groups aged 20-35) - 17%

2. *Did you have previous appropriate training for working with multi-age groups (took advanced training courses, had relevant courses while studying at the university, attended courses in non-formal education programs, self-education, etc.)?*

No - 91%

Yes - 9% (all 100% of the recipients noted that they became interested in the issues of teaching a foreign language to older people only after they saw that these students reacted badly to the standard methods used in modern foreign language courses; only in the form of self-education )

3. *In your opinion, do methodological approaches to teaching a foreign language differ for people of different ages?*

Yes - 79%

Yes, but only for short-term courses with limited learning goals (courses for seasonal workers; business foreign language courses, etc.) - 32%



No - 19%

It's hard to say / I haven't thought about this question - 2%

4. *Do you feel the difference when working with multi-age groups dominated by young people (under 35) and older students?*

Yes - 78%;

Yes, but I don't care (the students are to follow the teacher and the rules) - 34%

No - 22

No (only worked with youth groups aged 20-35) - 17%

The authors of the article were also somewhat surprised by the difficulties and difficulties identified by teachers who have experience working with older students. Among such typical ones as diverse learning settings, variability of previous knowledge and experience, pace of learning and adaptation (they are quite typical and students paid attention to them as well during the survey in the first part of the study), the most big challenge for the teachers from Khasakhstan and Portugal was a gap between generations and communication barriers, which was noted by the teachers, who worked with adult students and were younger by age, than then (about 14%). The teachers noted that it was psychologically difficult for them to establish an emotional contact with older students and to choose the appropriate manner of communication due to the peculiarities of language etiquette between older and younger people in these countries, and it was also very difficult to position themselves as a teacher with such an audience (since older people in these cultures are socially dominant in a certain way). Therefore, as these teachers noted, it is rather difficult to work with older students with no additional knowledge, skills and psychological training, and the students themselves are more comfortable learning from teachers who are closer to them in age.

The response of teachers and older students to the question about *how they would like to learn a new foreign language if they had to learn it* was also quite revealing:

I am completely satisfied with the format of the courses where I am currently studying / working - 20%

I would like to learn a language in the circle of people who are close to me not only in terms of education, but also in age - 57%

I would like to study the language with a tutor - 23%

It should be noted that among the people who have chosen the last option, 75% are teachers. The main reason for their choice is the lack of targeted professional training for modern specialists to work with such a unique category of students as people after 45 years.

In response to the Ukrainian crisis (in which, as in a mirror, can be seen typical problems that inevitably arise during migration processes, total globalisation, humanitarian, military and social conflicts that have intensified in different parts of the world), effective language teaching assumes a pivotal role in facilitating the integration and empowerment of displaced individuals. Language programs designed specifically for adult learners must adopt innovative methodologies that prioritise communicative competence, cultural sensitivity, and practical language skills. Tailored curricula, flexible learning modalities, and targeted support services are essential components of language education initiatives aimed at addressing the diverse needs of displaced populations. Furthermore, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment is crucial in fostering resilience and fostering a sense of belonging among adult language learners (Mei, 2022). By equipping displaced individuals with the linguistic tools to communicate and collaborate with local residents, language education initiatives facilitate intercultural understanding, social cohesion, and mutual support networks. Moreover, language learning serves as a bridge between diverse communities, fostering empathy, compassion, and solidarity in the shared pursuit of rebuilding lives shattered by conflict.

## **Conclusions**

The imperative of reforms in teaching foreign languages to adults is driven by both methodological necessity and societal trends. Adopting learner-centred approaches, offering flexible learning pathways, and emphasising practical language skills are essential for effectively meeting the needs of adult language learners. Moreover, recognising the social trends of globalisation, lifelong learning, and demographic shifts underscores the importance of prioritising language education for adults as a means of fostering intercultural understanding, promoting personal and professional development, and addressing the linguistic needs of diverse communities. Embracing these reforms not only enhances individual opportunities but also contributes to building more inclusive, interconnected, and multilingual societies in the 21st century. The Ukrainian crisis underscores the imperative of effective foreign language teaching for adults as a cornerstone of humanitarian response and community resilience. By empowering displaced individuals with the linguistic skills and cultural competence necessary for integration, language education initiatives offer a pathway towards rebuilding lives, fostering solidarity, and nurturing hope amidst adversity. As the global community rallies to support those affected by the Ukrainian conflict, prioritising effective language teaching stands as a tangible expression of solidarity and a beacon of hope for a brighter future.

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